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ABSTRACT

The Anglo educator views the Asian American as the ideal student: hardworking and not causing trouble. The quiet, passive behavior of Asian American students, however, often signifies problems in verbalization needing attention. The verbal problems of the Asian American student can be viewed as the product of a cycle involving the Asian American home and the schools, and evidenced by performance on standardized college entrance examinations. Close examination of Scholastic Aptitude Test examinations shows a marked difference between performance on the Verbal component versus the Math scores. Of an estimated 275 Asian American students at the University of Colorado, (Boulder), 160 were involved in the Asian American Educational Opportunity Program (AA-EOP) for academic year 1973-74. These students tend to be less verbal in class than their Anglo counterparts. They tend to score lower on verbal ability examinations than their university counterparts. They tend to choose majors requiring minimum self-expression and/or good math ability. In order to alleviate, at least incrementally, some of these problems, the AA-EOP is developing a curriculum program directed at reading, writing, and verbal skill development. The object is to develop verbal skills and to offer to the student a wider range of choices for major, career, and quite possibly, the direction of his/her life. (Author/JM)

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VERBAL SKILLS AND THE ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENT

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VERBAL SKILLS AND THE ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENT

Introduction

There is in education the persistent myth that Asian American students do not have academic problems pursuing their goals in education. That myth has made it difficult to persuade educators to address the educational needs of Asian American students, and even harder to convince administrators to allocate funds for academic and academic support activities. Further, only a few campus psychologists and counselors have recently asked why Asian American students do not utilize school staff and facilities organized to resolve personal, psychological problems.

The source of that myth lies in the history of the Asian in America, as pointed out by Watanabe (1972): the effects of cultural traits from Asia, the social, economic, legal, and political discrimination against Asians, and the impact of the adaptation of Asian Americans upon their education, communication patterns, and self-concept. The product of that history has created for the Anglo educator the stereotypical representation that all Asians are industrious, ambitious, quiet, and passive. While personal industry and ambition are certainly favorable traits, the quiet, passive behavior is too often unquestioningly viewed as a positive mode of behavior, and one to be encouraged. In sum, the Anglo educator views the Asian American as the ideal student: hardworking and does not cause trouble.

In the author's opinion, the quiet, passive behavior of Asian American students should not be unquestioningly encouraged. Rather, it often signifies problems in verbalization needing attention. The verbal problems of the Asian American student can be viewed as the product of a cycle involving the Asian American home and the schools, and evidenced by performance on standardized college entrance examinations.

The Cycle

As Watanabe (1973) has noted, Asian Americans have much in the way of historical and cultural baggage that impacts significantly on their perceived need for education. Asian immigrants brought with them a belief and value system that strongly emphasized filial piety, respect for and deference to authority, subordination of self to group, and fatalism (Watanabe 1973). When these cultural influences interfaced with social, political, and economic discrimination, the immigrant sought relief in the familiar confines of the Asian community, where silence, conformity, and inconspicuousness became strengthened as values unto themselves. But the Asian American could not forever remain in the geographical boundaries of the community. It seems that a combination of traditional Asian values and an assimilative adaptation led to the realization that education was the road to overcoming second-class status, and it became another strongly held and emphasized value.

To a large degree, Asian Americans have been (and presently are) able to achieve grades suitable for admission into institutions of higher learning. While this is partly the result of personal

industry, it is also the result of motivation partially borne of a community-family generated fear of failure and the aforementioned value of silence, conformity, and inconspicuousness. The Asian American has stressed these values, and in both ghetto and non-ghetto schools, quiet passive behavior is encouraged, particularly if contrasted with other, more verbal, and even recalcitrant behavior by peers. Thus, the values of the home are reinforced by the schools, and when good performance reports are taken home, the cycle becomes complete when the efforts are praised, and the school behavior is reinforced.

The cycle produces one obviously discernible result: Asian Americans succeed in getting admitted to colleges and universities. But there is another, less obvious result. Close examination of Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) examination shows a marked difference between performance on the Verbal component versus the Math scores.

The Product

Table I shows the average scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test by 103 Asian American Educational Opportunity Program (AA-EOP) students at the University of Colorado.

Statistical analysis shows that the average math performance was higher than verbal ability performance to a statistically significant degree: at the .01 level for all classes in school. This result is similar to results of the 1971 Sue and Kirk study of Chinese-American students at the University of California, Berkeley.

Table 2 compares the median SAT verbal performance scores by AA-EOP,

students to performances by the University of Colorado's general student population. Comparison shows that the AA-EOP median falls below the University median for the freshman, sophomore, and junior classes.

The lack of any real difference for the senior class may be explained in part by the nature of their presence in AA-EOP: unlike the large majority of the junior, sophomore, and freshman classes, the seniors were to a large extent admitted on their own merits to the University, and not for "educational opportunity" reasons. Recruiting efforts for the academically deficient student has increased in recent years, and the freshman class is perhaps more representative than others of the type of student that will be entering the AA-EOP in the future.

Table 3 shows the destribution of major fields for the 1973-1974 AA-EOP group.

Observations of University classes showed that Asian American students tend to sit at or near the rear of the classroom, to sit in small groups, and to be generally passive and quiet.

Implication for Program Development

The students in the Asian American Educational Opportunity Program thus share some common characteristics:

1. They tend to be less verbal in class than their Anglo counterparts.

2. They tend to score significantly lower on verbal than

math components on college entrance examinations.

3. They tend to score lower on verbal ability examinations than their University counterparts.

4. They tend, as in the 1971 Chu study (Watanabe, 1973) and the Sue and Kirk study (Sue and Sue, 1971) indicated, to choose majors requiring minimum self expression and/or good math ability. Almost two-thirds of the declared majors of AA-EOP students are in natural science, business, or engineering, though less than seven percent have humanities majors emphasizing creative, self-directed, and/or verbal skills.

The implications of these characteristics and statistical analysis are significant, in that they may mean:

1. that some AA-EOP students are pursuing degrees in non-verbal fields because they do not represent requirements demanding of a well-developed verbal facility;

2. that some AA-EOP students in the humanities or social science areas may not do as well as they could because of reticence, resulting in a general lack of professor-student discourse needed for learning and for good evaluations of their verbal performance;

3. that lacking well-developed verbal and verbal-related skills irrespective of major field may preclude satisfactory performance on standardized examinations for graduate study or in interview situations for employment;

4. that without developing adequate verbal and verbal-related skills, AA-EOP students may be hindered in the emergence of the self-confidence, positive self-image, and creativity needed to make them self-directed adults and even better assets to their

society.

In order to alleviate, at least incrementally, some of these problems, the AA-EOP is developing a curriculum program directed at the area of reading, writing, and verbal skill development. In doing so, it is not the object to change students' majors, to "sell" the humanities, or to radically change a student's personality. Rather, it is to develop the aforementioned skills, and to offer to the student a wider range of choices for major, career, and quite possibly, the direction of his/her life.

When the curriculum activities were in the planning stages, program staff had to answer three basic, curriculum related questions: What should be taught, who should teach, and how should they be taught?

What Should be Taught?

Research findings indicated that reading, writing, and verbal skills needed to be emphasized, and particularly for freshmen. AA-EOP offers a freshmen Summer Program for the "academically deficient," i.e. low verbal test results, poor English grades, or demonstrated English language problems. The 1974 Summer Program offered three courses: Reading and Writing Study Skills courses and an Asian American Communities course in the Sociology Department. The applicability of the Reading and Writing courses to the demonstrated needs is obvious, and the Sociology course placed more emphasis on verbal and verbal-related skills rather than the course material itself.

During the academic year, English 100 and 101 Composition courses are being offered, primarily for freshman and sophomore students. The lower division emphasis is purposeful: presuming the success of courses designed to alleviate academic and culturally-related deficiencies, AA-EOP hopes to be able to offer later, upper-division interdisciplinary courses in order to "enrich" the basic tools acquired in the freshman and sophomore years.

Who Should Teach?

The selection of "appropriate" persons to teach AA-EOP courses is extremely important for the success of the course. All of the current AA-EOP instructors share some or all of the following characteristics:

1. They are themselves Asian Americans.
2. They are knowledgeable about Asian American affairs.
3. They know of the specific and unique nature of the educational needs of Asian American students.
4. They have had experience in teaching Asian American students.

The selection of instructors who do not possess teaching skills as they relate to Asian American students would require, of necessity and at minimum, some orientation to Asian American affairs and the student's educational needs at the particular institution. Without the orientation, the course could gravitate toward a traditional lecture-exam mode, and the home-school-home cycle would add yet another factor: the University. The addition of the University to the cycle is something that should be avoided, particularly

because of the already significant reading, writing, and verbal problems encountered as a result of the aforementioned cultural factors.

How Should Courses Be Taught?

Conceptually, the optimal methodology for teaching these courses could include the following: student-oriented, with an emphasis on building a "community" within the classroom. The instructor would try to remove himself/herself from the pedestal of omniscience and infallibility to something less, though not entirely the facilitator-friend, and attempt to maximize the students' participation and responsibility for the success or failure of the course.

Operationally, the success of the course is, in large measure, dependent upon the instructor, which strengthens the importance of the instructor selection process. The English 100 and 101 courses succeeded in 1973-74 because of the willingness of the instructor to accept the errors in the previous year, (e.g. too little discipline, too much emphasis on verbal skills without "relaxing" the atmosphere, and too little knowledge of the students' needs) and to markedly change the teaching methodology. The reading-lecture-discussion-paper sequence was changed to emphasize the writing and discussion aspects. Further, student conferences were emphasized, to provide more immediate feedback to students on written performance. Finally, a "community" project was initiated: two publications, called "Kokoro," or "feelings" and "Paper Tiger," in which students wrote, critiqued,

selected, published and sold, their own best efforts. The publications were very positive factors, in that students were able to perceive a definite goal, and that the achievement of that goal was inextricably related to the strength and direction of their efforts.

The success of the English courses is also due to the participation of the students for the entire academic year. In this manner they are able to compare writing samples as the year progresses, and to do as much self-evaluation of improvement as the instructor does with them through conferences. Further, student participation increased as the year progressed, both as a result of the "community project" and increased familiarity with themselves and the instructor.

The Summer Program curriculum had another feature that contributed to its success: the three instructors, along with program staff, held regular conferences to discuss problems in their courses, individual students (since they shared the same students), and the necessity for changes in process or emphasis in their methodology. This provided for a dynamic learning and teaching environment, and benefitted not only the students but the instructors.

It should not be assumed that an all or predominantly Asian American student composition in class will improve verbal participation. The cultural baggage can become as operative in an all Asian American class as it does in a "mixed" one: no one wants to stand out, to violate peer group norms of silence and inconspicuousness, or to challenge the instructor. Only until the

instructor was able to gain the student's trust, the students got better acquainted with each other, and the "community project" was established did the cultural baggage begin to shed itself.

The Summer Program students are part of a full-year reading, writing, and verbal skills program. They participate in the three-course summer curriculum and continue in the Fall and Spring by taking the English 100 and 101 Composition courses. The difference between the Summer freshman and the Fall freshman is one of degree: the former has marked, demonstrable academic deficiencies, while the latter has a better, though not exceptional record of performance in the basic skills. Further, the Summer Program group is comprised of two very different sets of needs: one is represented by the American-born students, who need to refine their basic skills, and the other is represented by the foreign-born (though U.S. citizens) students, who need to develop their basic skills. The speed with which the instructors are able to assist the students is of necessity a function of the nature and level of their preparation prior to coming the the Summer Program. The foreign-born students will require a great deal more help, particularly in terms of the length and intensity of tutoring. Indeed, one of the English language tutors for AA-EOP has estimated that as much as three years concentrated assistance will be required to bring the foreign-born students to a level of competence in verbal-related skills that will enable them to compete on a par with their college peers.

Results?

Though longitudinal studies were not performed, nor can one assume the criticalness of coursework as a variable for change in a student, the instructors have nonetheless all indicated that generally, at least incremental progress was made by the coursework, but that *in vacuo*, the academic work cannot hope for total success. Adequately resolving the problems necessitates a systematic application of a comprehensive academic support program: learning problem-related coursework, academic and personal counseling, the provision of adequate social releases, and morale boosting. And not only does the approach have to be systematically comprehensive, but *over time*, so that a consistent pattern of support is available until such time that the student can become a more independent agent. That is *not* to say that students are "spoon-fed," but rather that support is provided of a nature and level that is appropriate for a given student.

Conclusion

The development of curriculum by an academic support program is not inappropriate, when one considers the nature of the courses offered. The curriculum is actually one of academic support: to assist students to better their ability to receive an education and to educate themselves. As AA-EOP continues its research into our students' educational needs, it is hoped that the future will show the necessity for higher level, interdisciplinary and highly verbal classes that can serve to build on the basic skills and enrich the students as they avail themselves of an "educational opportunity."

Table 1

Scholastic Aptitude Test

AA-EOP Math Versus verbal Performance

Class	Number	Avg. Math	Avg. Verbal	Avg. Diff.*
Senior	22	567	509	58
Junior	18	552	434	118
Sophomore	30	571	487	84
Freshman	33	549	442	107

* Significant differences based on a one-tail, two-sample, matched pair test for small n.

Note: Of an estimated 275 Asian American students at the University of Colorado (Boulder), 160 were involved in the AA-EOP for AY 1973-74. Of the 160, SAT scores were available on 103, or 64%. Of the remaining 57, 40 had ACT scores and 17 individuals did not have scores available. Though the ACT sample was small, the English scores were significantly lower than the math, notwithstanding the differences between the SAT and ACT exams.

Table 2

Scholastic Aptitude Test

AA-EOP Versus University

Class	Number	AA-EOP Median*	Univ. Median**	Difference
Senior	22	527	521	+ 6
Junior	18	454	527	-73
Sophomore	30	488	530	-42
Freshman	33	450	523	-73

* Actual median. Used median because information on University mean and standard deviation not available, thus precluding tests of difference.

** Based on actual frequency distribution of freshman scores on SAT scores for entering classes of 1970, 1971, 1972, and 1973. Assumed equal distribution of scores throughout fifty point score intervals; AA-EOP scores removed.

Table 3

Distribution of Major Fields

1973-1974 AA-EOP

Field	Number
Biology, Biology pre-med	19
Allied Health Fields	21
Business	27
Math-Chemistry	6
Physics	0
Engineering	14
Humanities*	9
Social Sciences**	26
Education	4
Environmental Design	5
Undecided	29
Total	160

* For declared majors includes Fine Arts and Music.

** For declared majors includes History, Sociology, Psychology, Journalism, and Asian Studies.

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